

University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012


China Beat Archive

2010

The Tao of Avatar — and why this sort of movie cannot be made in the PRC at this point in time ...

Sam Crane
Williams College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive>

 Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Chinese Studies Commons](#), and the [International Relations Commons](#)

Crane, Sam, "The Tao of Avatar — and why this sort of movie cannot be made in the PRC at this point in time..." (2010). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 743.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/743>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the China Beat Archive at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

The Tao of Avatar — and why this sort of movie cannot be made in the PRC at this point in time...

January 22, 2010 in [movies](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [Permalink](#)

By Sam Crane

We saw *Avatar* last night (I know, I've been on a movie kick of late...). It was visually stunning. The story was unremarkable: a melodramatic morality tale (the good guy wins in the end!). But it did have a couple of Taoist elements, which were no doubt quite consciously incorporated into the story.

First is the indirect invocation of *Qi* (*Ch'i*). In the movie, the planet of Pandora is, as the Sigourney Weaver character says, a complex, organic network of energy. Everything is interconnected and a life's-force energy flows through and around all. That is pretty much the notion of Qi. Now, strictly speaking, this is not just a Taoist concept but something more general in Chinese culture. Confucius and Mencius both mention Qi. But the notion of Qi as a broader natural force, which humans must learn to live with and through, is very much a part of Taoism, in both its philosophical and religious forms. In the film, the indigenous people are able to flow with Qi to such an extent that they can use it as a restorative and healing force. This is the essence of Chinese medicine (which owes much to Taoism): working with the flow of Qi to gain maximum physical health.

The movie also embraces a notion of *Tao* (*Way*) that comes rather close to a Taoist understanding. The grand maternal spirit, said to encompass all things, is called upon at a critical juncture: the hero character asks it to intervene in the consummating battle. But he is told by his indigenous lover that the grand maternal spirit does not take sides. All inclusive but indifferent – sounds like the *Tao Te Ching* to me:

Way is the mystery of these ten thousand things.

It's a good person's treasure and an evil person's refuge. Its beautiful words are bought and sold and its noble deeds are gifts enriching people.

It never abandons even the evil among us.

When the Son of Heaven is enthroned and the three dukes installed, parades with jade discs and stately horses can't compare to sitting still in Way's company.

Isn't it said that the ancients exalted Way because in it whatever we seek we find, and whatever seeks us we escape?

No wonder it's exalted throughout all beneath heaven. (62)

It turns out, in the film, that the grand maternal spirit does intervene at the crucial moment, which suggests that Way is not perfectly neutral but may tend in certain directions. This, to my mind, comes close to Chuang Tzu's notion of Way, which provides a kind of liberating joy. Way "acts," it "governs," in a manner beyond human comprehension, but with a tendency to balance "evil" with "good."

In any event, there are other more obvious Taoist themes: a pro-environmental message and an anti-militarist stance. All told, Pandora, the planet-utopia, is something of a Taoist ideal, which the greedy earthling humans are destroying...

I should also mention the name of the mineral that fuels human greed: "unobtainium." Nice! The thing we desire the most is unobtainable. Again: an idea right out of the *Tao Te Ching*...

Finally, let me comment on the Chinese reactions to the movie that [Roland, over at ESWN](#), posts. Take [this response by film director Lu Chuan](#):

I felt as if I had gone back to my childhood and became a small boy full of dreams ... but the simple story was flawless and the plot was very engrossing. *Avatar* let us know that we lack not only just in technology. Technology can be acquired. *Avatar* let me realize how far our movies are from simple perfection; how far our movies are from crystal-clear purity; how far our movies from passionate dreams; how far from genuine sincerity are we who are embroiled in grim entanglements and dim

vulgarity! We ought to be ashamed in the face of the purity of *Avatar*. This is a complete defeat that we Chinese filmmakers must collectively witness and concede.

This strikes me as an overreaction, but one with a kernel of truth. I suspect that Chinese filmmakers will embrace and expand upon the technology of *Avatar* with little trouble. And certain kinds of storytelling, especially melodrama, are very much a part of the Chinese cinematic repertoire. But something that distinguishes *Avatar*, and makes it unlikely to be reproduced in Chinese film making any time soon, is its critical nature. The film is a direct assault on American modernity in general and the Bush administration more particularly. Yes, the critiques lapse into caricatures — the evil military man crying out that we must “fight terrorism with terrorism” and launch a preemptive attack (Dick Cheney is clearly the model here) — but they are critiques nonetheless. And such obvious criticisms of specific political authorities and broader historical trends are just not possible in the PRC, given the political sensitivities of the CCP and the power of state censors. Even though ideological policing has relaxed significantly since the Maoist period, it is still constricting enough to prevent movie stories like *Avatar*.

If China wants to make movies like *Avatar*, the powers that be will have to press further with a famous Deng Xiaoping line: liberate thought — 解放思想. Or, as [Wen Jiabao said in 2008](#): “We have to free the minds of everyone, particularly of leaders, so that everyone can have independent thought, critical thinking and innovation capabilities”...

Sam Crane, Professor of Political Science at Williams College, is currently working on a book manuscript, Integrity Perfected: Ancient Chinese Thought in Modern American Life. He also maintains a blog, [The Useless Tree](#), where this essay first appeared. It has been reposted here in full with permission.